

Compensating Irish female revolutionaries, 1916-1923

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Title: 'Compensating Irish female revolutionaries, 1916-1923'¹

Author: Dr Marie Coleman,

Address: School of History and Anthropology,

Queen's University Belfast,

15 University Square,

Belfast BT7 1PA,

Northern Ireland.

Email: m.coleman@qub.ac.uk

Tel.: 028 9097 3255

Biographical note: Dr Marie Coleman is a Lecturer in modern Irish history at Queen's University Belfast. Her publications include *County Longford and the Irish revolution, 1916-1923* (2003), *The Irish Sweep: A history of the Irish hospitals sweepstake, 1930-1987* (2009) and *The Irish revolution, 1916-1923* (2013). She is currently working on a detailed study of revolutionary veterans in independent Ireland and on a number of projects related to the centenary commemorations of Irish independence.

¹ I am grateful to my colleagues Prof. Mary O'Dowd and Dr Elaine Farrell, and to the external peer-reviewers, for insightful comments and suggestions on this article.

Abstract

The newly released Irish Military Service Pensions Collection offers the most comprehensive opportunity to examine the role of women in the Irish revolution (1916-1923) or in any comparable nationalist revolution. It is also an extremely useful source of evidence for an emerging historiographical trend of tracing the post-revolutionary lives of female veterans by examining the award of service pensions to them by that state. This article will examine the role played by gender in the award of such pensions, the economic and financial significance of them in a state that had under-developed welfare provision and the importance of them as a symbolic recognition of women's roles in helping to achieve Irish independence. It also compares the post-conflict experience of Irish female revolutionary veterans with women who were involved in comparable international military conflicts.

Introduction

The island of Ireland is currently in the midst of an intense period of historical commemoration that has been dubbed the ‘decade of centenaries’. This refers to the political, military and social events in Ireland between approximately 1912 and 1923, that included the campaigns for female suffrage and trade union recognition, the ill-fated struggle for home rule, Irish involvement in the First World War, and the Easter Rising and subsequent guerrilla war for independence. It culminated in the partition of Ireland with the creation of a devolved government within the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland and an effectively independent dominion in the Irish Free State, which endured a brief civil war in 1922-23 in which the anti-Treaty Irish Republican Army² was defeated by the new Irish Free State Army.

In addition to numerous state ceremonies marking particular events during the decade of centenaries, the Republic of Ireland’s government has also engaged in a process of releasing extensive archival material relating to this period. The most important such collection is the Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC), currently being released online in a phased process on the website of the Irish Military Archives.³ This collection encompasses approximately 300,000 files relating to individual pension applications and administrative files.⁴ In the decades subsequent to independence successive Irish governments introduced a variety of schemes to compensate those who had served in the revolutionary organisations or who had been wounded or bereaved as a result of the conflict. The most prominent of these were the military service pensions

² A republican guerrilla army, founded as the Irish Volunteer Force in 1913, which fought for Irish independence in the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). Following the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, it split into pro- and anti-Treaty factions. The pro-Treaty wing became the Irish national (later Free State) army and the anti-Treaty wing, which continued to style itself as the IRA, sought unsuccessfully to oppose the establishment of the new state in the Irish Civil War (1922-23).

³ <http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection>

⁴ Patrick Brennan, ‘Origins, Scope and Content of the Collection’, in Caitriona Crowe (ed.), *Guide to the Military Service (1916-1923) Pensions Collection* (Dublin: Department of Defence, 2012), p. 14.

awarded to 18,000 men and women on the basis of the service they had given in the various revolutionary organisations and/or the Irish army between 1916 and 1923.⁵ The MSPC includes all of these files, along with 62,000 more applications that were rejected. Volunteers who had suffered physical wounds or psychological disability and the dependants of those who died were compensated with army pensions and these are also included in the overall archive.

To date there are currently close to 5,000 individual pension files released, of which 540 relate to women, making this already the most detailed archive available charting the activities of women in the Irish revolution.⁶ A further 3,252 women received service medals (out of 4,612 applicants). The vast majority of these – 3,175 – played more limited roles that did not reach pensionable service standard and were awarded service medals without bar.⁷ Women accounted for just under 10 percent of the total number of medal recipients (34,562) but the proportion of successful female and male applicants was similar, 70 and 73 per cent respectively.⁸ Similar figures for the number and proportion of successful female pension applicants will not be available until the full collection is released.

While this collection will allow for a much more detailed and varied account of the activities of Ireland's revolutionary women than has hitherto been possible, it will also enhance an emerging trend in revolutionary historiography of examining the post-revolutionary lives and experiences of veterans. Drawing upon examples from

⁵ For a detailed account of the introduction of this scheme see Marie Coleman, 'Military Service Pensions for veterans of the Irish revolution (1916-1923)', *War in History*, 20:2 (2013), pp. 201-221.

⁶ The release of files is ongoing until 2023 and at this stage it is not possible to estimate accurately the number or proportion of female applicants or their success rate.

⁷ In the 1940s veterans who met the standard for the award of a military service pension were entitled to a service medal with bar. A medal without bar was introduced to provide recognition for those who had taken a less active part in the independence campaign and did not reach the higher standard of pensionable service.

<http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection/search-the-collection/medals-series>

⁸ These figures are derived from the medals database on the <http://msearch.militaryarchives.ie/>. I am grateful to Cecile Gordon for her advice on retrieving the figures.

individual pension files and from the administrative files this article examines the role played by gender in the introduction and award of service pensions, the significance of recognition for female veterans in both the struggle to be included in the scheme and to be awarded appropriate service, and the economic and financial benefits of monetary compensation for veterans in the later stages of their lives in a state that possessed limited welfare provisions.

Women in the Irish revolution

Senia Pašeta's recent work on women in Irish nationalism between 1900 and 1918 has shown that 'From the late nineteenth century ... to their enfranchisement in 1918' women 'were involved in almost every advanced political association and activity apart from the Irish Republican Brotherhood.'⁹ Approximately 300 women were involved in the 1916 Easter Rising, holding buildings, supplying Volunteers and acting as messengers in the main sites of action in Dublin, Wexford and Galway. The majority of these were members of Cumann na mBan (the League of Women) established in 1914 as the women's auxiliary to the Irish Volunteers, and a smaller number were in James Connolly's labour militia, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA). Between 1919 and 1923 women's activity became more militarized during the Irish War of Independence (1919-21) and subsequent Civil War (1922-3).

By 1919 the Irish Volunteers evolved into the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and waged a guerrilla war for independence from Britain for two-and-a-half years. During that conflict members of Cumann na mBan assisted the IRA campaign with intelligence gathering, first aid, and transportation of arms, but were not involved in actual combat

⁹ Senia Pašeta, *Irish nationalist women, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 7. The Irish Republican Brotherhood was a secret oath-bound society formed in 1858 with the aim of achieving an independent Irish republic through revolutionary action.

actions.¹⁰ A majority of Cumann na mBan members rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty and played a similar supportive role to the anti-Treaty IRA in its short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful effort to oppose the establishment of the new Irish Free State during the Civil War.¹¹ With the exception of the army doctor, Brigid Lyons, there were no women involved in the military actions of the pro-Treaty Irish Army during the latter conflict.

For many years the story of women's involvement in the Irish revolution was largely absent from the standard narrative of the period, in spite of the fact that, as Pašeta has noted, 'many Irish women who were active in the nationalist circles in the early twentieth century did not expect to be forgotten'. Women such as Eithne Coyle and Sighle Humphreys left written accounts of their activities but these never appeared in the public domain or garnered the popularity of published memoirs by renowned male guerrilla fighters such as Dan Breen or Tom Barry.¹² Furthermore, as Louise Ryan has shown, when women featured in memoirs written by revolutionary men, they were often marginalized or portrayed in traditional feminine roles, such as exalting the domestic influence of the guerrillas' mothers.¹³

The marginalization of women's roles in the revolutionary movement was also affected by the demonization of anti-Treaty women in published works that appeared soon after independence, most notably *The Victory of Sinn Féin*, 'P.S. O'Hegarty's misogynistic rant ... [which] ... singled out republican women, or at least the women who did not agree with him, as "practically unsexed", animated by "swashbuckling and bombast and swagger" and utterly incapable of understanding the complexities of

¹⁰ Marie Coleman, 'Cumann na mBan in the War of Independence', in John Crowley *et. al.* (eds) *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (forthcoming, Cork University Press).

¹¹ Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish revolution*, rev. ed. (Cork, 2014), pp. 179-228.

¹² Pašeta, *Irish nationalist women*, p. 1.

¹³ Louise Ryan, 'Splendidly silent: Representing Irish republican women, 1919-1923', in Ann-Marie Gallagher *et. al.* (eds) *Re-presenting the past: Women and history* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 23-43.

politics.’¹⁴ In a similar vein, Seán Ó Faoláin denigrated Constance Markievicz’s political activism, artistic abilities, and maternal instincts in his 1934 biography that has formed the basis of most other studies of the rebel Countess until recently.¹⁵

The development of the academic study of Irish women’s history from the 1970s onwards led to the first systematic studies of Irish women’s involvement in nationalist politics, epitomised by Margaret Ward’s *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* in 1983.¹⁶ The release in 2003, and online from 2012, of the Bureau of Military History (BMH) archive has resulted in the role of women becoming a more integral feature of studies of the revolution. This oral history archive comprising 1,773 witness statements of activists, was recorded between 1947 and 1957 and includes 146 transcribed statements along with original documents, photographs and a small number of voice recordings from a total of 153 women.¹⁷

Nevertheless, this source has significant limitations. Fearghal McGarry has cautioned that ‘Dates, numbers and other details are often inaccurate’. Some anti-Treaty republicans who remained unreconciled to the new state refused to participate in the project, including Elizabeth O’Farrell one of the most prominent women involved in the Easter Rising who carried the surrender flag along Moore Street to signal the cessation of the rebellion.¹⁸ Specifically in regard to women, Eve Morrison has shown that the evidence is skewed by the selectivity of the subjects interviewed: ‘The tendency to select for interview former officers of the Dublin-based leadership of Cumann na mBan and the reluctance of some of the women to give statements (or talk about their own

¹⁴ Pašeta, *Irish nationalist women*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Lauren Arrington, *Revolutionary lives: Constance and Casimir Markievicz* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 270-72.

¹⁶ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable revolutionaries: Women in Irish nationalism* (Dublin, 1983).

¹⁷ Eve Morrison, ‘The Bureau of Military History and female republican activism, 1913-23’, in Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (ed.) *Gender and power in Irish history* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 59.

¹⁸ Fearghal McGarry, ‘“Too many histories”? The Bureau of Military History and Easter 1916’, in *History Ireland*, vol. 19, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2011), pp. 26-9.

activities if they did), had a negative impact on the representation of female Republican activism.’¹⁹ The BMH also avoided the controversial territory of the Civil War, relating largely to the period from 1916 to 1921.

The numbers of women covered by the MSPC is considerably more extensive than the BMH, and it also represents a much wider geographical spread. Whereas the Bureau was unbalanced in favour of Dublin and the leadership cadre of Cumann na mBan, women who served at all levels of Cumann na mBan applied for pensions from all parts of the country, including areas where the independence campaign was less vigorous. This collection is probably the most comprehensive source we will ever have for charting the role of women in the Irish revolution. Indeed it will be one of the most detailed archival collections for charting the role of women in any national revolution that will cover the activities undertaken by women as well as the subsequent treatment of female veterans by the state.

It is difficult to know whether the experience of these Irish women differed much from that of women involved in nationalist uprisings or military conflicts elsewhere as very few of these seem to have had comparable service pension schemes. There appear to be some similarities with *soldaderas* from the Mexican revolution. The Mexican government was seen as largely indifferent to them, paying them negligible sums in pensions to the extent that many lived in abject poverty; Valentina Ramirez ‘received a pension but it was so small that she could barely buy food’ and ‘had to live in great misery in the slums of Navolato, Sinaloa.’ The situation for non-combatants in Mexico was even worse; camp followers did not receive pensions and ‘It took tremendous political activism’ for the families of ‘deceased male veterans’ to get their

¹⁹ Morrison, ‘The Bureau of Military History and female republican activism’, p. 68.

pensions.²⁰ Ireland and Mexico appear to be among very few armed conflicts where female participants were awarded pensions for service. In another contemporary conflict, the Finnish Civil War of 1918, in which approximately 2,000 women took part as guards and soldiers, pensions were awarded to widows of deceased male combatants, and as in the case of the Irish Free State between 1924 and 1934, these were restricted to the victorious White side.²¹

More recent conflicts in Africa echo some of the difficulties that Cumann na mBan experienced in proving active service based on rank and participation in certain activities. In Zimbabwe in the 1980s ‘female fighters were brought back into the country as refugees who did not qualify for demobilization payments’.²² Some of the different militant groups in Mozambique did not issue ranks to women at all, while others distributed them in random fashion often linked to that of their husbands or partners. This had the effect of causing resentment when women felt that their contribution had been equal to or greater than that of others who were in receipt of higher rankings and more lucrative pensions.²³

The fight for recognition: pensions for women

While the MSPC archive gives a much greater insight into what Cumann na mBan volunteers did during the actual revolutionary period, it is also extremely valuable for shedding light on the subsequent lives of these women. To date the historiography of the revolution has focused largely on the experience of activists prior to the revolution

²⁰ Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican military: Myth and history* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 50-51.

²¹ Tiina Lintunen, ‘Women at War’, in Tuomas Tepora and Aapo Roselius (eds) *The Finnish Civil War 1918* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 201 and 227.

²² Norma J. Kriger, *Guerrilla veterans in post-war Zimbabwe: Symbolic and violent politics, 1980-1987* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 100.

²³ Jareme R. McMullin, *Ex-combatants and the post-conflict state: Challenges of reintegration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 134.

in an effort to ascertain how factors such as family background, social class, cultural nationalism, ideology and associational culture, among other things, were responsible for their politicisation and subsequent involvement in revolutionary organisations.²⁴ By contrast there has been much less focus on the after-life of revolutionary veterans, both male and female, aside from some who were prominent in Irish public life. Fearghal McGarry's study of the Abbey Theatre rebels of Easter Week highlights just how valuable the pension records are for filling in these gaps in our knowledge, as shown by his examination of the life of Ellen Bushell in the decades after the Rising; 'Until now, the remarkable extent of Ellen's involvement in the War of Independence has remained hidden from view ... Few details of Ellen's life between the end of the Irish revolution and her death are known other than those recorded in her Military Service Pensions files.'²⁵

One important aspect of this post-revolutionary experience relates to the independent Irish state's treatment of veterans in general, and women in particular. The strong anti-Treaty line adopted by Cumann na mBan is seen as having soured the attitude of the Cumann na nGaedheal²⁶ government towards women, and influencing the restrictive legislation and practices adopted towards women in society and employment during the 1920s, that included prohibitions on the continued employment of women after marriage and a severe curtailment of the opportunity to serve on juries.²⁷ It is also a likely explanation for Cumann na mBan being excluded initially from pension eligibility.

²⁴ The best example of this is R.F. Foster *Vivid Faces: The revolutionary generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (London: Penguin, 2014).

²⁵ Fearghal McGarry, *The Abbey rebels of 1916: A lost revolution* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2015), p. 230-36.

²⁶ The political party formed from the pro-Treaty wing of Sinn Féin after the Treaty split, which held power as the Free State's first government from 1922 until 1932.

²⁷ Jason Knirck, *Women of the Dáil: Gender, republicanism and the Anglo-Irish Treaty* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 170-71.

The first Military Service Pensions Act was introduced by the pro-Treaty Cumann na nGaedheal government in August 1924. The pensions to be awarded under it were unusual in that they were for service alone, rather than for death, illness or injury, all of which came under a separate Army Pensions Act that had been introduced the previous year. A further unusual aspect of these pensions was that they were awarded for service in the underground volunteer militias that had prosecuted the military side of the campaign for Irish independence between 1916 and 1921; proving membership of and service in such bodies would become one of the most contentious aspects of the scheme.

The nature of these pensions as being solely related to service, and the timing of their introduction in 1924 are significant and indicate that they were a hasty measure designed to quell disaffection in the pro-Treaty political and military ranks after a failed army mutiny in 1924. Defeating the anti-Treaty IRA in the Civil War of 1922-23 necessitated an expansion of the fledgling Irish national army, and when the threat had receded by 1924 there followed a programme of substantial demobilisation and downgrading of ranks, reducing respectively the number of soldiers from 52,000 to 30,000, and officers from 3,000 to 1,300. Opposition to this move resulted in a minor mutiny in March 1924 which the government succeeded in quelling and in the process affirming the subordination of the defence forces to the civilian government. Nevertheless, sufficient bad feeling remained for the government to seek ways of preventing further splintering of the pro-Treaty bloc and paying off disgruntled soldiers with pensions was a means to this end.²⁸

A requirement of the new pensions' act that eligible applicants must have served in the Irish national army during the Civil War in addition to the revolutionary

²⁸ For details of the army mutiny see M. Valiulis, *Almost a rebellion: The Irish army mutiny of 1924* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1985) and J.M. Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution, 1921-1936* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), pp. 163-97. The link between the mutiny and military service pensions is explored further in Coleman, 'Military service pensions for veterans of the Irish revolution', pp. 205-6.

organisations between 1916 and 1921 preserved the spoils for the winning side in the Civil War. It also underlined the role of the army mutiny as a factor in the origins of the pensions as these soldiers were precisely the ones whom the government sought to keep on side. The role of the army mutiny as a precursor to the introduction of the pensions and the emphasis on satisfying ex-soldiers of the national army largely explains the exclusion of women from the 1924 act. This legislation was not designed primarily to compensate those who had fought in the revolution before 1921, but rather those who served in the national army during the Civil War. As such, women did not figure in the policy behind the introduction of the first military service pensions act in 1924. The only woman who was potentially eligible was Dr Brigid Lyons, who served as an army doctor between 1922 and 1924, and was the only female soldier in the Irish army before 1980.²⁹

In this regard the Irish military service pensions can be viewed as an early historical example of what would today be considered a programme for the financial re-integration of ex-combatants following a military conflict.³⁰ As such the rationale behind it, of pacifying ex-combatants to neutralise them as a potential threat to the stability of the new political order, has similarities with Kathleen Jennings's gendered critique of programmes for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) in post-civil war Liberia. The perceived danger posed by idle ex-combatants changed the nature of DDR in Liberia from that of socio-economic reintegration to the elimination of a security threat seen as being posed solely by males. This is in itself a highly-gendered assumption that idle males will of necessity turn violent. As a result the

²⁹ M.P. Keane to Secretary, Department of Defence, 19 Nov. 1927, Military Archives, Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC), W24SP1361: Brigid Lyons.

³⁰ This idea is elaborated further in Marie Coleman, 'Financial reintegration assistance for veterans of the Irish revolution (1916-1923): Post-conflict policy in an historical setting', Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice, Queen's University Belfast, working paper (June 2015) <https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/isctsj/filestore/Filetoupload,517191,en.pdf>

programmes were based on the assumption that ‘men’s participation in DDR is far more vital’.³¹ This also appears to have been the case in post-Civil War Ireland.

Gender and the politicization of pension eligibility

To be eligible for a pension an applicant had to have served in the national army or associated security forces (which included the Criminal Investigation Department, Protective Corps and Citizens’ Defence Force³²) during the Civil War and in one of a number of named organisations in the independence campaign between 1916 and 1921; these were the Irish Volunteers (pre-Truce IRA), including the Volunteer Executive and GHQ staff, the Irish Citizen Army, Na Fianna Éireann³³ and the Hibernian Rifles³⁴. While women were not specifically excluded, the failure to include Cumann na mBan in this list effectively made them ineligible. Women had been members of the Irish Citizen Army, but none of these served in the army during the Civil War, leaving them outside the bill’s benefits also.

Brigid Lyons was a medical student at University College Galway in 1916 when she accompanied her uncle, Joseph McGuinness, to the Irish Volunteer garrison at the Four Courts during the Easter Rising. Although much of her time was spent ‘making tea and sandwiches’, her medical training was put to use dressing the wounds of injured volunteers. After the Rising she was among the 77 women arrested and imprisoned

³¹ Kathleen M. Jennings, ‘The political economy of DDR in Liberia: A gendered critique’, in *Conflict, Security and Development*, 9: 4 (2009), pp. 475-494.

³² The Criminal Investigation Department was a Dublin-based plain-clothes detective unit established in 1922 and was responsible for some controversial killings of opponents of the Treaty during the Civil War. It was assisted by the Protective Corps and Citizens’ Defence Force, which carried out guard and intelligence-gathering duties.

³³ Republican boy scouts founded by Constance Markievicz and Bulmer Hobson in 1909 and effectively the youth wing of the Irish Volunteers.

³⁴ A militia group linked to the Ancient Order of Hibernians (Irish-American Alliance).

briefly for ten days.³⁵ She went on to play an active role in the political side of the independence campaign, electioneering for her uncle when he became one of Sinn Féin's first elected MPs in the 1917 Longford South by-election. She remained active in Cumann na mBan during the War of Independence, where her activities included the transportation of arms and ammunition from IRA General Headquarters in Dublin to the local IRA in Longford, delivering IRA communications, and providing first aid for volunteers who had been wounded in military engagements with the Crown forces.³⁶

Her pension application was rejected initially in the belief that the legislation did not include women. When the bill was being debated in Dáil Éireann [Irish Parliament] in 1924, W.T. Cosgrave, the leader of Cumann na nGaedheal and President of the Executive Council [prime minister], stated clearly that it did not extend to women: 'The word "person" refers to males.'³⁷ Lyons's case had emerged in the course of the Senate's debate on the bill, although she was not referred to by name. Rejecting an attempt by Senator Colonel Maurice Moore to amend the bill to include women, Cosgrave explained that: 'There is only one person that I know qualified in one respect, and I do not think she is qualified in the other respect. Service in the National Army is a condition precedent to getting a pension. We have had only one lady doctor, and that lady is not qualified by reason of pre-Truce service.' He had, however, changed his opinion on the legislative definition of a 'person': 'But I am advised that "person" includes "persons of both sexes."' ³⁸ He subsequently admitted that the legislation was covered by the Interpretation Act of 1923, the first line of which stated that: 'In this Act

³⁵ Bureau of Military History (BMH), WS259: Dr Brigid Lyons Thornton. For details of the 77 women imprisoned after the Rising see Mary McAuliffe and Liz Gillis, *Richmond Barracks 1916: 'We were there' – 77 women of the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016).

³⁶ Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution, 1916-1923* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003), pp. 53 and 186; 'Military Service Pensions Act, 1924. Affidavit of applicant for certificate of military service under above act', 21 April 1926, MSPC, W24SP1361: Brigid Lyons.

³⁷ *Dáil Debates (DD)*, vol. 8 (15 July, 1924), col. 1266.

³⁸ *Seanad Debates (SD)*, vol. 3 (28 July 1924), col. 1012.

and every Act passed after the commencement of this Act, unless the contrary intention appears – (a) words importing the masculine gender shall include females’.³⁹

In spite of Cosgrave’s publicly-stated view that Lyons was not eligible for a pension, he appears to have been instrumental in her attaining it eventually. At the time her pension application was rejected initially she was undergoing treatment for tuberculosis in France and Switzerland and the correspondence in her pension file indicates her pessimistic outlook at the time. With a dim prospect of recovery, or in the event of recovery, of ever attaining suitable remunerative employment, the prospect of a pension was extremely important to her financial well-being:

I have no hopes myself but I know you will not forget me if there is any chance. It would mean such a lot if I had something definite to rely on for the future. I am no better than when I came and have given up expecting to get well now even if I undergo another operation. Securing a post even if I were able to keep one seems utterly impossible however things cannot always be as bad as they are at present.⁴⁰

Her uncle, Frank McGuinness, a Cumann na nGaedheal Senator, had raised her case with W.T. Cosgrave, who promised to see if anything could be done for her.⁴¹ In late 1926 the Board of Assessors who adjudicated on pension applications reversed its opinion and found her eligible for a pension.

At this point her case became entangled with that of another 1916 veteran, Margaret Skinnider, who applied for a wound pension under the 1923 Army Pensions Act. Skinnider was one of the most prominent women to take part in the Easter Rising. A maths teacher from Glasgow, whose parents were from County Monaghan, she had been involved in Irish republican organisations in her home city before coming to

³⁹ Interpretation Act, 1923 (46/1923), section 1 (1) (a) www.irishstatutebook.ie

⁴⁰ Brigid Lyons to Gearoid O’Sullivan, 25 March 1925, MSPC, W24SP1361: Brigid Lyons.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Dublin in late 1915 when she joined the ICA. During the Rising she served in the St Stephen's Green-Royal College of Surgeons garrison under the command of Michael Mallin and Constance Markievicz, effectively defying Mallin's attempts to curtail her combat activities on account of her gender.⁴² In the early hours of Thursday morning, 27 April, she was shot and badly wounded while leading an ICA contingent into Harcourt Street, receiving 'Two gunshot wounds in shoulder and one gunshot wound ¼ inch from spine'. No female rebels were killed during the Rising and Skinnider was the most seriously wounded with her injuries initially considered potentially life-threatening. Arrested briefly in the aftermath, her doctors insisted that she remain in hospital on account of the seriousness of her injuries. She subsequently saw active service with Cumann na mBan during the War of Independence and Civil War, spending most of the latter conflict in prison as a republican opponent of the Treaty.⁴³

In 1925 Skinnider's application under the 1923 Army Pensions Act for a wound pension for the 1916 shoulder injury was refused following a ruling by the Treasury Solicitor that the term 'soldier' in the 1923 Army Pensions Act applied exclusively to men: 'I am satisfied that the Army Pensions Act is only applicable to soldiers as generally understood in the masculine sense.'⁴⁴ The following year, in spite of the favourable finding by the Board of Assessors in Brigid Lyons's case, the Army Finance Officer argued for the application of this ruling to Lyons's situation also. The army authorities argued that Lyons's post-Truce service in the army during the Civil War did not count, claiming that she had been employed purely in a civilian capacity to tend to the unusually high number of women republicans imprisoned by the Free State

⁴² L.W. White, 'Skinnider, Margaret (1893-1971)', in James McGuire and James Quinn (ed) *A Dictionary of Irish Biography from the earliest times to 2002* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Application for an army pension, 12 Feb. 1925, MSPC, W1P724: Margaret Skinnider.

⁴⁴ Treasury Solicitor to Army Finance Officer, 18 Mar. 1925, MSPC, W1P724: Margaret Skinnider.

authorities during the Civil War, a number of whom undertook hunger strikes and required medical attention.⁴⁵

The Parliamentary Secretary [junior minister] for Defence, George Nicholls, who was also a close friend of Lyons, disagreed with both the Army Finance Officer and the original finding of the Treasury Secretary in the Skinnider case, on the basis of the Interpretation Act and Article 3 of the Irish Free State constitution⁴⁶, which guaranteed equality of citizenship without distinction of sex:.

Every person, without distinction of sex, domiciled in the area of the jurisdiction of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) at the time of the coming into operation of this Constitution, who was born in Ireland or either of whose parents was born in Ireland or who has been ordinarily resident in the area of the jurisdiction of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) for not less than seven years, is a citizen of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) and shall within the limits of the jurisdiction of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) enjoy the privileges and be subject to the obligations of such citizenship...⁴⁷

The opinion of the Attorney General, John A. Costello, was sought to resolve the issue; he found that Lyons's commission was valid 'and lawfully granted' and the term 'person' in the Military Service Pensions Act included women. Her Certificate of Military Service and accompanying pension were duly authorised in November 1926. She was awarded a total of 8.264 years of service at the rank of Commandant, entitling her initially to an annual pension of £123.⁴⁸ She was the only woman to receive a pension under the 1924 act. She recovered from the tuberculosis and had a successful

⁴⁵ Army Finance Officer to the Minister for Defence, 13 Nov. 1926, MSPC, W24C1295: Brigid Lyons.

⁴⁶ Minute by George Nicholls, 16 Nov. 1926, MSPC, W24C1295: Brigid Lyons.

⁴⁷ Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) Act, 1922 (1/1922), www.irishstatutebook.ie

⁴⁸ MSPC, W24C1295: Brigid Lyons.

career as a public health physician. At the time of her eventual death in 1987, aged 91, she was still in receipt of a monthly pension of £339.77.⁴⁹

Brigid Lyons was not entitled to a pension under a strict interpretation of the 1924 Military Service Pensions Act. By her own admission, in her pension file, she was ‘not a member of the IRA in 1916. I was a member of Cumann na mBan’, and she ‘Never actually joined IRA as a force’.⁵⁰ Yet, she was awarded service in the Irish Volunteers. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the rules were manipulated to ensure that a pension was awarded to a prominent pro-treaty supporter with strong connections to the governing party who found herself in a difficult situation. She was well connected within the revolutionary Sinn Féin party, as the niece of one of its first TDs [Teachta Dála/Member of Parliament], Joseph McGuinness. Her uncle Frank clearly used his influence with W.T. Cosgrave, and some of those involved with the administration of the pensions were very close friends and allies. These included the secretary to the pensions Board of Assessors, Gearóid O’Sullivan, and the Parliamentary Secretary for defence, George Nicholls, in whose house she was lodger during her time at medical school in University College Galway and who was one of her principal referees for the pension application.⁵¹

By contrast, Margaret Skinnider was, in the words of Army Adjutant General, Hugo MacNeill, ‘a prominent irregular’.⁵² It is difficult to see how the Treasury Solicitor’s view was compatible with the Interpretation Act that ‘words importing the masculine gender shall include females’. When the MSPC was released initially in

⁴⁹ MSPC, W24C1295: Brigid Lyons.

⁵⁰ Handwritten note in pension file, MSPC, W24SP1361: Brigid Lyons.

⁵¹ Handwritten note by George Nicholls, 16 Nov. 1926 on minute from Army Finance Officer to Minister for Defence, 13 Nov. 1926, MSPC, W24C1295: Brigid Lyons; reference of George Nicholls for Brigid Lyons’s pension application, 29 June 1926, MSPC, W24SP1361: Brigid Lyons.

⁵² Aodh MacNeill [Hugo MacNeill], Adjutant-General, to Army Pensions Department, 4 Mar. 1925, MSPC, W1P724: Margaret Skinnider. The term ‘irregular’ was pejorative term used by the Free State government to describe anti-treaty republicans.

January 2014 much of the media coverage focused on the rejection of Skinnider's pension application on gender grounds; the front page headline in *The Irish Times* declared 'Rebel denied a pension because she was a woman'.⁵³ While this reflects accurately the reason stated at the time, a wider analysis of the decision, especially in the context of Brigid Lyons's case, suggests strongly that gender was the pretext and not the reason for the decision. The Cumann na nGaedheal government sought an excuse not to give a pension to a republican who had opposed the treaty.

This view is reinforced by similar decisions regarding the denial of legitimate compensation to those who were legislatively entitled to it. Patrick Wilcox and John McCarvill, two former officers of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), who had resigned from the police force during the War of Independence in sympathy with the republican campaign for independence, were approved for compensatory pensions in 1923, but the payments were withheld because they had also supported the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War; their pensions were restored by Fianna Fáil⁵⁴ in the 1930s.⁵⁵ The denial of pensions to Skinnider and to the RIC men was a fulfilment of W.T. Cosgrave's promise in 1923 that he would 'not pay the pension of any person who has been in arms, or otherwise seriously responsible, in connection with the late outbreak [i.e. the Civil War]'.⁵⁶

The anomaly created by Skinnider's situation was not rectified until the 1932 Army Pensions Act specifically listed Cumann na mBan as an organisation to which the legislation governing disability pensions applied. This appears to have been done in the wider context of extending the benefits of the legislation in general to anti-Treaty republicans, rather than trying to rectify the specific anomaly relating to women; the

⁵³ *Irish Times*, 17 Jan. 2014.

⁵⁴ A political party formed in 1926 by Eamon de Valera following a split in Sinn Féin in opposition to Sinn Féin's policy of non-recognition of the Free State. It was the main opposition party from 1927 until 1932 when it defeated Cumann na nGaedheal to form a new government.

⁵⁵ National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Department of An Taoiseach (DT), S2085.

⁵⁶ *DD*, vol. 4 (30 July 1923), col. 1625.

Minister for Defence, Frank Aiken explained that ‘This Bill will provide for those who fought on the Republican side in the civil war the same classes of pension as were provided for those who fought during the Black-and-Tan war and during the civil war in the National Army.’⁵⁷ Skinnider reapplied under the new legislation in 1937 and was awarded her disability pension the following year.⁵⁸ Also in 1938 she was awarded an annual military service pension of £80, following the extension of these pensions to women also.⁵⁹

The problem of proving active service

Cumann na mBan was eventually recognised legislatively as an eligible organisation for military service pensions when Fianna Fáil introduced a major overhaul of the pension legislation in 1934. Throughout its time in opposition from 1927 until 1932, Fianna Fáil decried these pensions as a source of jobbery and corruption for the governing party, accused Cumann na nGaedheal of trading pensions for votes, and promised to abolish the pensions as soon as they got into government. Within two years of acceding to office, rather than abolish the pensions, they chose instead to extend eligibility to anti-treaty republicans. It was at this juncture that Cumann na mBan was included.⁶⁰

Cumann na mBan was not included in the first draft of the bill circulated to the cabinet on 30 July 1934, but the cabinet decided in August that it should be.⁶¹ In spite of this Cumann na mBan remained excluded from the bill as introduced and passed initially by the Dáil, a fact commented unfavourably upon by Fine Gael [the successor party to Cumann na nGaedheal], and it was only as a result of an amendment in the

⁵⁷ *DD*, vol. 44 (20 Oct. 1932), col. 219.

⁵⁸ MSPC, W1P724: Margaret Skinnider.

⁵⁹ MSPC, W34D1990: Margaret Skinnider.

⁶⁰ Coleman, ‘Military service pensions for veterans of the Irish revolution’, pp. 213-15.

⁶¹ First draft of Military Service Pensions Bill (1934), Extract from cabinet minutes, 29 Aug. 1934, NAI, DT S6272B.

Senate by Fine Gael's Michael Staines that it was included in the act as passed.⁶² It is not clear why the government failed to implement its own decision and rely on accepting an opposition amendment in this case, especially as Cumann na mBan members had been eligible for disability pensions since 1932. Having been included as something of an afterthought, Cumann na mBan members were to be limited, along with Fianna Éireann, to the two lowest possible ranks for pension purposes – D and E. Frank Aiken, the Minister for Defence who introduced the bill, was clearly unconvinced that many women would be successful with their applications under the act, perhaps explaining the apparent reluctance to include them in the first place:

I want to point out, however, that the same test of service will be applied to women as was applied to men and that that will result, in my opinion, in very few being granted an active service certificate. If the Seanad [Senate] inserts this amendment, I propose on the Report Stage, to move a further amendment to the Bill which will have the effect of ensuring that while members of Cumann na mBan are treated equally with men, they will not be treated better. If the officers of Cumann na mBan of nominal high rank were treated in the same way as officers of the Volunteers there would be a very big discrepancy, because their responsibilities were not as great.⁶³

The evidence available in the archives released to date would suggest that Aiken's predication was accurate. A large number of the women whose files are now available had claims for service in certain periods rejected, though only a small number had their applications rejected in their entirety. In cases where applications were rejected it was usually because the act was deemed not to apply.

Women themselves were certainly of the opinion that they were treated harshly by the assessors. In the late 1930s Old Cumann na mBan, an organisation representing

⁶² *DD*, vol. 53 (9 Aug. 1934), cols. 2403-4, *SD*, vol. 19 (30 Aug. 1934), cols. 561-2.

⁶³ *SD*, vol. 19 (30 Aug. 1934), col. 561.

Cumann na mBan veterans that helped them to submit pensions applications, complained that women were being restricted to 1916 service for pensions and not being given any credit for activities during the War of Independence and Civil War.⁶⁴ Mary White of Enniscorthy, County Wexford, complained to the secretary of the pensions board that a number of Wexford women who were only recognised for service in part of Easter Week should have been entitled to full service for that week as well as for the entire period to 1923. She referred to the cases of Ellen and Teresa Keegan who were members of Cumann na mBan since its foundation in 1914 who she argued were entitled to full military pension as their ‘services were whole time from 1914 to 1923 - & not intermittent service either.’ Nor was she satisfied that the board had taken fully into account the effect of such service on the economic livelihoods of these women; the Keegans lost their dressmaking business because of their activities, while Mary Kate (Murphy) Doyle ‘risked a very good position as private secretary in a loyalist firm to take part in the Athenaeum in 1916.’⁶⁵ On appeal the Keegans were eventually awarded a minor increase in the period of recognised service.⁶⁶

Under the two principal acts of 1924 and 1934, applicants who were dissatisfied with the findings of the assessors had a right to appeal the decision to Minister for Defence. However, this appeal had to be based on new evidence that was not available at the time of the initial findings. If the evidence had been available, but not produced by the applicant the first time around, it did not count as new evidence. Most appeals were usually on the grounds that either the rank awarded or the period of service recognised were inadequate. In this regard Cumann na mBan applicants appear to have

⁶⁴ ‘From “Statement on Pensions Restrictions” (c. 1938-9)’ in Angela Bourke *et. al.* (eds) *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol. V* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 150-52.

⁶⁵ Mary White to Michael Cremen, 15 Apr. 1941, MSPC, WMSP34REF22204: Ellen Keegan. The Athenaeum theatre was the centre of the rebellion in Enniscorthy.

⁶⁶ MSPC, WMSP34REF22204 and W34E6864: Ellen Keegan; WMSP34REF22205 and W34E6865: Teresa Keegan.

been victims of the biggest flaw in the entire pensions process – the failure to define the term ‘active service’. The 1924 act defined ‘military service’ as ‘active service in any rank’ in the eligible forces. In 1934 this was altered slightly to read: ‘A person shall for the purposes of this Act be deemed to have been serving in the Forces while such person was rendering active service in any of the bodies which constitute the Forces ...’.⁶⁷ In spite of this effort to tighten the wording no satisfactory definition of it was ever produced.

The absence of a clear definition resulted in the different adjudicators of claims applying different and often contradictory criteria. The Board of Assessors which adjudicated claims under the 1924 act required applicants to demonstrate that they had taken part in ‘Acts of War’, defined as including attacks on enemy forces and destruction of their property; the manufacture, purchase and disposal of munitions; intelligence gathering; and organisation and training for such activities.⁶⁸ Under the 1934 act the Board of Assessors was replaced with a Referee, who was either a judge or experienced barrister, and a four-person advisory committee, two of whom were IRA veterans. In practice the appointees were political allies of the parties in power and none of the assessors who served between 1924 and 1958 were women. During the 1930s, these assessors expected successful pensioners to have been involved in a ‘major operation, i.e. ambush, barrack attack, etc.’ in addition to having ‘good general service ... in conjunction with the major operation’.⁶⁹ If it was difficult to provide a standard by which to judge the active service of the Irish Volunteers, the non-combat role of

⁶⁷ Military Service Pensions Act, 1924 (48/1924), section 1; Military Service Pensions Act, 1934 (43/1934), section 2 (1), www.irishstatutebook.ie

⁶⁸ Memorandum by Gearóid O’Sullivan, 16 Oct. 1924, MSPC, SPG/6/13

⁶⁹ ‘Military Service Pensions Acts (1934-1949). Memorandum from Referee [Eugene Sheehy] to Advisory Committee’ [c. 1955], University College Dublin Archives (UCDA), Seán MacEoin Papers, P151/526.

Cumann na mBan made the situation even trickier when it came to applications from women.

A more liberal regime for assessing pensions operated during the 1950s. A new Military Service Pensions Act was passed in 1949, opening up new routes of appeal to previously unsuccessful applicants, and transferring the route of appeal from the Minister for Defence to the Referee, to avoid any sense of politicisation. In addition, the Referees for much of this period, Tadhg MacFírbisigh [Timothy Forbes] and Eugene Sheehy, were more lenient in regard to interpreting active service. Sheehy, who was a brother of the well-known women's rights advocate Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, relied on a liberal interpretation of the term 'in actual military service' provided by Lord Justice Denning in the British Court of Appeal in cases of unattested soldiers' wills. Denning held that the term 'actual military service' applied to 'any soldier, sailor or airman ... if he is actually serving with the armed forces in connection with military operations which are, or have been, taking place, or are believed to be imminent'. This definition extended to auxiliary services that when applied in the Irish revolutionary context would clearly have included Cumann na mBan: 'It includes not only the fighting men, but also those who serve in the Forces, doctors, nurses, chaplains, Women's Royal Naval Service, Auxiliary Transport Service'. Sheehy made it clear that he was prepared to apply 'the principle suggested by Denning L.J. in his very useful analysis' in his adjudication of pension applications.⁷⁰

The files now available show that some women were successful in their appeals under the 1949 act. Elizabeth (Cullen) O'Brien had her initial application for service in Enniscorthy during the Rising rejected in 1942, but an appeal under the 1949 act resulted in Eugene Sheehy making an award of service for 3 days during Easter week

⁷⁰ *Re. Wingham (Deceased), Andrews and Another v. Wingham*, 2AER, 908, cited in 'Military Service Pensions Acts (1934-1949). Memorandum from Referee [Eugene Sheehy] to Advisory Committee', UCDA, P151/526.

and partial service in 1920 and 1921, earning her an pension of £11.⁷¹ Three others who had been involved in the Rising in Enniscorthy – Lily (Roche) Ennis, Kate Murphy and Christina Ward – and one from Galway - Katie (Fahy) Nelly - also had initial rejections overturned by Sheehy in the 1950s.⁷² MacFibisigh had previously upheld five appeals from Galway women who were involved in 1916.⁷³ In 1952 MacFibisigh further awarded pensions to two Galway women – Kathleen Kennedy and Brigid Lardner – who appealed under the 1949 act against previous rejections. Their initial applications were rejected in the early 1940s, when the High Court ordered the quashing of these original orders. MacFibisigh subsequently confirmed the rejections in 1946, before changing his mind six years later for reasons that are not clear from the archival evidence.⁷⁴

Geography proved to be an additional handicap to gender when it came to women who had fought in the Easter Rising outside of Dublin looking for pensionable recognition. Both Cumann na mBan and the Irish Volunteers in Galway and Wexford experienced much greater difficulty getting pensions than those who turned out in Dublin City and County in Easter Week; even the Referee in the 1940s, Tadhg MacFibisigh considered ‘the inequality of treatment meted out to Galway and Wexford and some of the Louth applicants is indefensible.’⁷⁵ The total number of women recognised for Easter Week service with the award of pensions was 213, approximately one-tenth of the figure for men of 2,077. A further fifteen received medals only.⁷⁶ Of

⁷¹ MSPC, W34E9094: Elizabeth O’Brien.

⁷² MSPC, W34REF55133: Lily Ennis; W34REF58418: Kate Murphy; W34REF24575: Christina Ward; W34REF14582: Katie (Fahy) Nelly.

⁷³ MSPC, W34REF46870: Annie (Barrett) Allum; W34REF14667: Dolly (Broderick) Fleming; W34REF14668: Margaret Rose Grealy; W34REF59605: Mary (Rooney) McNamara.

⁷⁴ MSPC, W34REF28883: Brigid Lardner; MSPC, W34REF3257: Kathleen Kennedy.

⁷⁵ Report of Referee, T. MacFibisigh, 11 Dec. 1945, NAI, DT S13602A.

⁷⁶ In total 2,594 people were recognised with Easter Week Service, including medals, service pensions or army pensions paid to dependants. See list of 1916 veterans with recognised military service, http://www.militaryarchives.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/MSPC/documents/Veterans_of_Easter_Week_1916_with_recognised_military_service-3_June_16.pdf

the total number of women pensioners, 160 were from Dublin. While this is not surprising as most of the action took place in Dublin, it also reflects the fact that those who participated in the Rising in Dublin – both men and women – had a much easier time securing service pensions. It is impossible to state accurately what proportion of women who took part in the Rising were awarded pensions, due to the fact that most women were not arrested, and because the pension figures are themselves the basis for estimates of the number of women who took part.

A small number of women had their applications for 1916 service rejected in total, including the sisters Mary and Kate Ward. In Mary Ward's case the rejection was probably based on a belief that her service was minimal in nature. In her application she outlined her service during Easter Week as 'Commandeering articles for Headquarters. Cooking and all other duties as ordered. Got first aid materials ready, helped making stretchers. In charge of cigarettes and tobacco.' Subsequently she helped 'to raise funds to have Requiem Masses offered. Subscribed to hampers for Frongock [sic]⁷⁷. Signed petition to release prisoners.' Much of her remaining activity until the Civil War consisted of fund-raising, catering and visiting prisoners. Perhaps in the hope that declaring her political allegiance would help her cause she noted 'I have always supported Fianna Fail [sic].' This plea had little effect on one member of the Advisory Committee who noted 'I personally think an award would be ludicrous'. She was subsequently informed that she was not a person to whom the act applied.⁷⁸

Some women from Wexford who were denied service were unable to provide a detailed account of what they did or produce adequate references from their commanders of the time. Such testimony from local leaders was essential to the success of a pension application. In Margaret Forrestal's case, the local Cumann na mBan had

⁷⁷ This refers to Frongoch prison camp in Wales where a large number of the male participants in the Easter Rising were interned in the latter half on 1916.

⁷⁸ MSPC, WMSP34REF24485: Mary Ward.

‘no record of her having performed any special activities’ during Easter Week.⁷⁹ Annie Murphy, whose claim was based on her efforts to stop British soldiers commandeering the bicycles of the priests for whom she worked as housekeeper, was not even able to give the name of her commanding officer, stating vaguely that it was ‘no one in particular.’⁸⁰

The financial and symbolic significance of pensions

Appeals against disappointing judgements reflected the significance of the pension in the eyes of the applicant. To some the monetary compensation involved might well have been significant. Diarmaid Ferriter has highlighted the poor economic circumstances that many veterans found themselves in and in such cases these pensions were a very important source of income.⁸¹ Applying for a pension for the first time in 1950, Kathleen Clarke, the widow of the executed 1916 rebel leader Thomas Clarke, and a prominent republican in her own right, stated that she had not applied until that point ‘because I felt I did not require it but, as my circumstances have changed considerably since that time, I would be glad if my application could now be considered.’⁸² She was subsequently awarded an annual pension of £70. She was also in receipt of £500 annually under the Army Pensions Act as compensation for the loss of her husband in the Rising.⁸³

Many were considerably worse off than Clarke. Bridie Lane, who was involved in the Easter Rising in Galway complained to Frank Aiken in 1936 that ‘I am

⁷⁹ MSPC, W34REF23904: Margaret Forrestal.

⁸⁰ MSPC, W34REF25474: Annie Murphy.

⁸¹ Diarmaid Ferriter, “‘Always in danger of finding myself with nothing at all’: The military service pension and the battle for material survival, 1925-55”, in Crowe (ed.) *Guide to the Military Service Pensions Collection*, pp. 127-8.

⁸² Caitlín Bean Uí Cléirigh [Kathleen Clarke] to Minister for Defence, 18 Apr. 1950, MSPC, W34D2421: Kathleen Clarke.

⁸³ MSPC, WC66: Thomas Clarke.

completely destitute now with want'.⁸⁴ Annie (Norgrove) Grange, a member of the Irish Citizen Army who was imprisoned briefly after the Rising, explained her desperation for a pension in 1937: 'Now Dear Sir I am in great need of this money as my husband is unable to work through ill health and he receives only 15/= w[ee]kly outdoor relief. I pay 6/= w[ee]kly rent out of same and I have two children to feed. My father used to give me some help but he is now dead.'⁸⁵

By 1941 Nora Connolly O'Brien, a daughter of the executed 1916 socialist leader James Connolly, found herself in similar circumstances after her husband who worked as an agent for a British firm lost his job through the adverse effects of the Economic War with Britain and the Second World War on British trade with Ireland. She wrote despondently to the pensions board: 'I am at my wits end. We are absolutely on the rocks. This week will see the end of us unless I have something definite to count upon ... I am absolutely blue, despondent, down and out, hopeless and at the end of my tether'. Her situation was supported by Kathleen Clarke, who lamented 'they have nothing. It is an awful position for James Connolly's daughter'.⁸⁶

The latter comment implies a hierarchy of veterans, with special status being accorded to the dependants of the 1916 leaders, and the signatories of the proclamation in particular. This was reflected in the special provisions made for the widows, children and sisters of the signatories in 1927 when lifetime annual allowances of £180 for widows and £52 for sisters, in addition to £80 per child to up to the age of 25, were introduced. These figures were increased in subsequent legislation.⁸⁷ Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid has shown how significant, but also complex and challenging, this inheritance was for many children of revolutionary martyrs. While 'The political legacy

⁸⁴ Bridie Lane to Frank Aiken, 12 Feb. 1936, MSPC, W34E5227: Bridie Lane.

⁸⁵ Letter of Annie Grange, 6 Apr. 1937, MSPC, W34E215: Annie (Norgrove) Grange.

⁸⁶ Kathleen Clarke to the Referee, 20 May 1941, MSPC, WMSP34REF59637: Nora Connolly O'Brien.

⁸⁷ Army Pensions Act, 1937 (15/1937), section 3, www.irishstatutebook.ie.

of being Cathal Brugha's son or James Connolly's daughter ... clearly opened political doors', nevertheless 'The enormous weight of the paternal political legacy made independent thought difficult, let alone independent politics.'⁸⁸

These women's financial dependence on such payments reflected the absence of a state-sponsored social insurance system in Ireland at the time. It was not until 1952 that a limited form of social insurance was introduced in the Social Welfare Act, but even then it excluded about half of the working population who were self-employed. A gradual improvement in state welfare provision came during the 1960s and 1970s with the introduction of contributory old age pensions (1960), occupational compensation for workplace injuries (1966) and a retirement pension (1970), culminating in comprehensive insurance-based social welfare for all full-time workers in 1974, by which time a great many revolutionary veterans had died.⁸⁹ The provision of state-subsidised health care was also inadequate until the Health Act of 1953 introduced hospital services free of charge or for a modest fee.⁹⁰

The plight of revolutionary veterans who were suffering social and economic deprivation was recognised by the government in 1943 when a means-tested special allowance was introduced for 1916 veterans with recognised service (either a military service or army pension or medal) who through the 'passage of time and by economic circumstances ... are ... incapable of self-support by reason of age or permanent infirmity'.⁹¹ Eligibility to apply for such allowances was extended widely in 1946 to include all veterans with pensions and medals, including those who had a medal without

⁸⁸ Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, "'Fighting their fathers' fight": The post-revolutionary generation in independent Ireland', in Senia Pašeta (ed.) *Uncertain futures: Essays about the Irish past for Roy Foster* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 148-60.

⁸⁹ Mel Cousins, *The birth of social welfare in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 202-3.

⁹⁰ Ruth Barrington, *Health, medicine & politics in Ireland, 1900-1970* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1987), pp. 248-9.

⁹¹ *DD*, vol. 89, no. 8 (4 Mar. 1943), col. 959.

bar.⁹² The pension files highlight the economic significance of these allowances: Mary Adrien, a Cumann na mBan 1916 veteran, received an allowance of £15 in 1948 when old age and blindness forced her to give up a clerical post; her only other income was her military service pension.⁹³

In the case of Cumann na mBan members, who were only entitled to pensions at the two lowest grades, the sums involved were often quite negligible. The smallest period of pension service appears to be about 1 5/7 year, given to many of the women who took part in the Rising in Wexford and Galway, in recognition of 3 days of active service during Easter week. By 1934 this translated into an annual pension of just over £8.⁹⁴ The most lucrative pension awarded to a female applicant would appear to be the £123 received by Bridget Lyons under the 1924 act, in recognition of 8 years' service at the rank of Commandant. She was not restricted to the lowest ranks, whereas none of the pensions given to Cumann na mBan under the 1934 act matched her award. The highest award made under the 1934 act appears to be that given to Leslie Barry (formerly Leslie Price, and the wife of the renowned IRA guerrilla leader Tom Barry). In addition to Easter Week service, she served on the executive of Cumann na mBan from 1917, resulting in an award equivalent to 11 years of service at Rank D, entitling her to an annual pension of £112 in the 1930s.⁹⁵ Until 1953, any pensioner who was in receipt of other remuneration from the state had the value of that income deducted from their pension on a pro-rata basis, a peculiarity introduced in 1924 to discourage too many veterans from seeking state employment.⁹⁶ In the case of women who were

⁹² Marie Coleman, 'Service medals and special allowances', in *Military Service (1916-1923) Pensions Collection: The medal series* (Dublin: Department of Defence, 2016).

⁹³ MSPC, WDP14100: Mary Adrien.

⁹⁴ MSPC, W34E5742: Mary White.

⁹⁵ MSPC, W34D760: Leslie Mary Barry.

⁹⁶ Marie Coleman, 'Military service pensions for civil and public servants in independent Ireland', in *Administration*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2012), pp. 51-61.

employed by the state as civil or public servants or teachers, including Brigid Lyons and Margaret Skinnider, that reduced further the value of their pensions.

Financial compensation was not always the sole or primary purpose for pension applications. Applications were made initially for certificates of military service, on foot of which a pension could be sought from the Minister for Finance. In spite of the often minimal value of some pensions, reduced further if the public service abatement applied, the award of a certificate of military service was of itself significant for many applicants as formal recognition of the part they played in achieving Irish independence. This sentiment was summed up well by Máirín (Creegan) Ryan who withdrew her application for a pension when she was awarded a 1916 medal: ‘Now that I have been awarded the 1916 medal I am quite content, since it was some recognition, rather than a pension, that I sought.’⁹⁷ Applying for the first time in 1952, Mary Kavanagh was awarded one day of Easter Week service by Eugene Sheehy in 1955, qualifying her for an annual pension of only £2. This minimal remuneration suggests strongly that recognition rather than reward motivated her application.⁹⁸

Applicants were also concerned to ensure equality of recognition with others. Elizabeth Corr from Belfast, who had travelled from Belfast to Coalisland and Dublin along with Nora and Ina Connolly in Easter Week in an effort to mobilise Volunteers and Cumann na mBan from Ulster, appealed a decision not to award her any 1916 service. Comparing her service to that of the Connolly sisters, both of whom were recognised as having service for the entire period of Easter Week,⁹⁹ she complained that ‘Ina Connolly (Mrs Heron) has received a pension for her work during Easter Week. If she is considered entitled to a pension, then so am I ...’, and that Nora Connolly ‘did

⁹⁷ MSPC, WMSP34REF: 52184: Máirín Ryan.

⁹⁸ MSPC, W34E10043: Mary Kavanagh.

⁹⁹ MSPC, W34E5633: Nora Connolly O’Brien, W34E4818: Ina Connolly Heron.

not do anything that I did not do'. Her appeal was partially successful and she was eventually awarded three days service for Easter Week.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The Military Service Pensions collection is probably the most comprehensive source we will ever have for charting the role of women in the Irish revolution. While the pension applications do not equate with the Bureau of Military History in terms of detail, they provide a wider perspective on what a much larger group of women, from all parts of the country, at all levels of the organisation, did during these years. This will allow historians to give more definitive answers to questions such as how many women were members of Cumann na mBan, what backgrounds did they come from, and what motivated them to take part in a violent uprising against British rule in Ireland?

The collection is almost as valuable for what it tells us about the post-revolutionary lives of these women. In many cases we get an insight into how significant the often minimal amounts of pension were to them as they struggled with meagre incomes and poor health in their later lives. The pensions' process also provided a very valuable route towards recognition for these women. Máirín Ryan's contentment with her 1916 medal is an excellent example of how much greater a significance was attached to this rather than the monetary recompense.

The attitude towards women veterans in independent Ireland reflects the wider attitude of the political elite of the new state towards women. As Maryann Valiulis has shown the 'very rigid traditional gender roles that emerged in the post-revolutionary period' and which appeared to be at odds with the more 'fluid nature of gender roles in the revolutionary period itself', were the product of a number of factors, including the

¹⁰⁰ MSPC, WMSP3410854 and W34E8285: Elizabeth Corr.

social conservatism of the new political leaders, the influence over civil society exercised by the Roman Catholic Church, and ‘an underlying sexism in advanced nationalist thinking’. The latter point is well illustrated by Frank Aiken’s attitude to pensions for Cumann na mBan.¹⁰¹

The hostility towards Ireland’s revolutionary women, bordering on misogyny in the cases of P.S. O’Hegarty and Seán Ó Faoláin, that resulted from Cumann na mBan’s rejection of the Treaty should be recognised as part of the wider context of women’s struggle to have their revolutionary legitimacy recognised by the pension assessors. Such a rejection of women’s contribution to independence struggles after the conflict, and a desire to return women to traditional domestic roles, is not an uncommon feature of independence struggles. In Zimbabwe former female guerrillas had greater difficulty getting demobilization money and were portrayed inaccurately and derisively in the press as prostitutes.¹⁰² Furthermore, the criteria by which pensions were assessed were highly gendered, placing greater weight on military actions carried out by men and relegating women’s non-combatant activities to lower status.

Gender interacted with other factors in the difficulties experienced by many women in gaining their pensions and the attendant recognition that such implied. In Margaret Skinnider’s case, the political division of the Treaty split was the real reason for the initial denial of her pension, though gender was a convenient pretext for the decision; it appears to have been more acceptable to say she did not deserve the pension because she was woman than because she was a republican. Women who fought in the Rising outside of Dublin, in Galway and Wexford, had to overcome the double handicap of gender and geography.

¹⁰¹ Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, ‘The Politics of Gender in the Irish Free State, 1922–1937’, in *Women’s History Review*, 20: 4 (2011), p. 570.

¹⁰² Kriger, *Guerrilla veterans in post-war Zimbabwe*, pp. 99–100; Tanya Lyons, ‘Guns and guerrilla girls: Women in the Zimbabwean national liberation struggle’, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Adelaide (1999), p. 218.

The sense emerges clearly from the archives that the fight for recognition by Irish female revolutionaries was a hard one. The exclusion of Cumann na mBan from the initial 1924 act set the tone for the treatment of Cumann na mBan veterans until the end of the 1940s at least. Women had an extremely difficult time both verifying and convincing the Referee of the merits of their service. The 1949 act and the more liberal interpretation of active service by the new Referees in the 1950s seem to have rectified at least some of the injustices in this regard. Nevertheless it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the female veteran was very much the poor relation among the old comrades of the Irish revolution.